

Average People

College towns are funny. I'm sitting in a small cafe, reading my little book, eating my little breakfast. I'm the only customer around and the employees seem to have forgotten there's even me, so they start gabbing to themselves. The Mexican immigrant chef is chatting to the high school dropout waitress. Pause here and ask yourself what these two people might talk to each other about in their spare time. Try and think about what you might talk to them about were you in such a situation. Now recall that you're in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were talking, quite animatedly, about the demographic trends for marriage under European-style social democracy.

They quickly shut up when a girl walked in. "The usual?" asked the girl behind the counter. "Yep," said the girl coming in the door. The order was prepared and delivered while the two girls chatted politely. Then the girl took her food and left. "God, I hate her," said the girl behind the counter. "I don't understand how an idiot like that goes to Tufts. She doesn't care anything about *ideas*."

College towns are funny.

Recently, Seth Roberts and I have embarked on an odd little project. We've gone to various colleges in the area and asked kids why they're there. The first day was at Berkeley and as I walked through Sproul Plaza at noon, kids of every shape and description trying to push fliers and come-ons in my face as I just tried to look around, I had a feeling it wasn't going to be easy.

Seth was wearing a tattered brown jacket and had a not-entirely-shaved face and, to be honest, looked a little odd. So when he went up to students and asked them if they had a minute, everyone said no. We went through five or six awkward such rejections until we realized that he should start off by saying he was a tenured professor at Berkeley. Nobody said no after that; apparently people initially thought he was a homeless person.

For right or wrong, I'd come to think of random people as boring. In part, I think this is because I'm shy, and I feel less bad about my inability to make conversation with strangers if I can persuade myself that the conversation isn't going to be worthwhile. After months of trying to make my way through desultory conversations with other Stanford students ("What are you studying?" "Oh, I don't know yet. You?" "I don't know yet either.") I finally gave up and spent the rest of my time there with my nose in a book.

And part, perhaps, is that average people just have a really bad rap. Books complain about the anti-intellectualism of American culture. Professors complain about the students who don't care about the work. Newspapers complain about the ignorant red state-filling wingnuts. The average person seems like a dangerous entity, like the fellow at the lecture with the long and rambling not-quite-a-question that makes you think that maybe elitism isn't such a bad idea after all.

And who knows, maybe average people are actually like that. Maybe college towns are funny.

We went to three colleges: Stanford, UC Berkeley, and Berkeley City College. The colleges are quite different. Stanford is a large elite school for people who want to become professionals. (I'd always heard this from my teachers, that Stanford was a place of people who were pre-med and pre-law and pre-grad school, but I wondered how big the effect was. As I was sitting down to interview our first Stanford subject, I wondered if we'd interview enough people to be able to notice the difference. That's when she explained that she was pre-med.)

UC Berkeley is a state school, although a respected one, with a large campus, although mixed in with an interesting city. (Stanford is almost literally surrounded by a moat.) And Berkeley City College is a junior college, in an attractive new building in the middle of the city, full of people who want to transfer out of there and into the real thing.

There were differences between the schools, of course, but more noticeable was the basic fundamental similarities. Everyone we spoke to, with one exception, was intelligent, articulate, had coherent thoughts about their situation and its place in the larger context, and was someone I enjoyed talking to. (The one exception was even more thought-provoking and made me wonder what it meant to be intelligent and why I felt so uncomfortable around him.)

Seth was much braver than I and took most of the brunt of the conversation, leaving me to observe and reflect quietly. But even just watching random conversations with random people was a thoroughly rewarding experience. I felt as if it was some essential task of humanity that I had heretofore neglected.

Everyone we interviewed stands out, but perhaps a few examples will give you the flavor of people's situations. There was the young man at Stanford who had started a web-based business with his friends from high school. He soon realized that they were in an overcompetitive market and during his first year at Stanford had reconfigured their business plan to target a new space. Meanwhile, he planned to take business classes to get a more academic grounding in his profession.

There was the African-American girl at UC Berkeley who loved her courses in African-American Studies, how they revealed a secret history of her country that she'd never before heard told. She couldn't see making a living in the subject, of course, but she wanted to study it while she could, before she had to find a real job. A job like, if she had to pick right now, probably teaching.

There was the Berkeley City College student who had done three years of college in Chile, spent a couple years in Germany, and now worked in Berkeley as a professional dancer, hoping to get college credit so she could get a job doing Latin American human rights work, ideally for the UN.

I am not sure what to say to these people. I understand the paths their lives are on and I see the flaws in the institutions in which they reside, but I have trouble imagining how I can fix things for them, as people. The problem with psychologists, sociologists complain, is that they're too obsessed with individual people. And the problem with focus groups, even though they were invented by a sociologist, is that people are too obsessed with themselves. They see their problems, they see the context, and they reflect on them, but it's not clear to either of us how they can particularly be remedied. The situations are just too big.

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